

THE BUILDING

Where we live nothing is connected. The brick on one side of the building turns a corner to rows of vinyl siding, and then drops to halved oval thatches like the roofs of cottages by the sea.

Like when the girl who lives beneath me left a note on the gate for the mailman, which I read every word of only to watch him later toting his letters back to his truck without having seen it, and it didn't occur to me to stop him.

The same way that, when I saw her later eating lunch alone in the garden, it didn't occur to me to sit in the empty chair beside her, to ask about the tomatoes she grows in the pots by her door.

THE LESSON

CK invented sex in the dirt alleys of our burning steel drum neighborhood, beneath the construction-closed UAW expressway and the sound of downshifting county dump trucks. He figured out how to put bodies together crouched behind the dumpster with a half-smoked cigarette, hugging twenty ounce bottles of Mountain Dew to his smooth, bare chest, and stuffing his hands into the girls' front pockets on the loading dock behind the party store. The summer before the cops dragged his kicking feet through the curbside weeds, while the works department was still laying conduit beneath the road, he used a stick to draw a diagram in the wet concrete outside the post office that even the girls at the love motel couldn't believe.

GRANNY SAYS HE'LL BE BACK

CK's not afraid of anybody. Not you, not the lunch lady, not the patrol car that stopped him late last night on the sidewalk, not the bailiff who choked him asleep on the courtroom floor when he tried to throw his folding chair at the judge.

Granny won't pick up the phone when he calls. She says he'll be home in a few weeks just like last time, just like the time before. Six messages today and all I know is, "You have a collect call from the Genesee County Jail."

I think I'm gonna love him forever. I write his name all over my hands inside the blue ink outline of dozens of empty hearts. When the sheriff's suburban turns around in the neighbor's circle drive, I chuck a rock at its big, black rim. I climb into the tree-house crying and stay there until long after the sun goes down behind the high school, and when no one comes to find me, I slam the back door so hard the spring flies off into the hall.

BAD CARDS

You were ten when you told the other kids in the neighborhood not to let Derrick in on their pick-up games of rock throwing, which is why the man that married Derrick's mom did not like you, why he pulled you up by the t-shirt onto the low stone wall that guarded his proud colonial, explained to you about playing cards, how God deals them out individually, that Derrick's hand was somehow insufficient, somewhat short. The whole business of cards was new to you, though, and you thought about it all the way home to your house full of Parcheesi boards and Legos, country songs on tape. You didn't tell him that where you lived everyone played Hungry, Hungry Hippos, or, sometimes, if Dad wasn't around, Mathblaster in long, productive spurts. By the time you knew how cards worked, you'd be grown, gone, your hand laid down to a boy who wasn't always telling the truth. When Derrick was a man he'd start sending you text messages about his fiancée, invite you over to play Xbox or watch movies on HBO. "No thanks," you knew you're supposed to say, but didn't. "My boyfriend never listens to me either," you'd say. "I, too, enjoy Chinese food." "I, also, have never really been in love."

MACK STREET

Ask Dan Miller about the ball he says is not in his right hand, about the path he's worn in the grass from here to the porch, from here to first base, grey grass beat into dry dirt using only bare heels, the weight of small, hard bodies, the weight of an entire summer without rain. If this was a photo, he would be background, on a radio, the sound of hard feet thunking through a hollow hall, places where we've thunked for entire afternoons to the sounds leaves made on branches. It'll be a day like today when we will invent the stars, pull them across the sky through open upstairs windows, holding back the curtains with our pale, nicked up wrists. We will scale the roof of a porch that touches the moon and try to hold the tail of a train that crashes through narrow vacancies of light. We will run the rail toe first, then heel.

THIS IS HOW YOU REMOVE THE COVER FROM THE POOL

I am on the landing when Mom asks Dad what the problem is. The carpet is new, and the polyester scratches my face as I lay my ear closer to the edge of the stairs. He says it has something to do with the way she eats her ice cream, the tacos she makes that are not really tacos, the paintings of mountains that look more like hills. Then there's a silence that I think means something other than silence. Next, a "No, I will not go to counseling," a "No, I do not think that I have changed." In the months that follow, strangers will see the sign out front and knock on the sliding glass doors. "Mom is at night school," we'll tell them. "Dad lives in an apartment across town." We'll write the asking price down on a scrap of notebook paper. "This is how you turn on the garbage disposal," we'll explain. "This is how you remove the cover from the pool."

II

LITTLE MISSOURI

362 DAYS ON A LOADING DOCK

It starts at six AM on a Sunday; there is a spider running along the Halloween display, and he won't kill it. He pulls down his zipper where the security cameras won't see him. I am surprised by his warmth.

The winter is especially cold. A twelve point buck bounces across the hood of his rental truck. I kiss him through an open window at the Mobile station. I begin to suspect he only owns one pair of jeans.

During the new year I leave the porch light on all night and the front door unlocked. He hangs the spare key to a Dodge Stratus on a thumbtack in my kitchen/living room.

On Valentine's Day the company switches out his van for a newer one. We load it full of two liters next to the Christian college in Albion. We celebrate the leap year in front of a mirror; I am alone on Easter.

On Mother's Day, I kick over a flattop cart of 7 Up boxes in the middle of the diaper aisle. He pushes my face out a screen door and locks it. It is almost June when I throw my phone against the hall closet. I do not anticipate it hitting the floor in three pieces.

The company holds a meeting by speakerphone in the back of a gas station. I sit in the parking lot of a Polly's in Tecumseh for half an hour before electing not to go in. The man who dusts off the box wine tries to put his hand up my shirt.

I am gone by the fourth of July.